

VZCZCXRO0548
PP RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHFL RUEHKUK RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHLH RUEHPW
RUEHSR
DE RUEHROV #0180/01 3340917
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 300917Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0856
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0890

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000180

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2032
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [SA](#) [VT](#)
SUBJECT: HOLY SEE PLEASED ABOUT SAUDI KING MEETING WITH POPE,
INTERESTED IN INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

REF: (A) VATICAN 165, (B) VATICAN 151

VATICAN 00000180 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Chris Sandrolini, CDA.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: a Vatican official with first-hand knowledge of the recent meeting between the Pope and King Abdallah characterized the Saudi monarch's visit as an important step in the development of Saudi-Holy See relations. The Holy See continues to press for greater religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. While conditions for the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations are not present, the Holy See is open to further dialogue. King Abdallah distanced himself from the letter on inter-religious dialogue that a group of 138 Muslim scholars recently sent to the Pope and other Christian leaders. For the Holy See, the letter is an important tool for intra-religious dialogue within Islam. The most important aspect of the King's visit was the fact that a visit took place.
End summary.

A First for a King

¶2. (C) Embassy poloff met on November 19 with Monsignor Alberto Ortega (protect), the Holy See's Secretariat of State director for North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Ortega, who was present during the November 6 meetings at the Vatican of Saudi King Abdallah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, welcomed the visit and characterized the King's meeting with the Pope as cordial. While Abdallah had already been to the Vatican as Crown Prince, it was the first ever visit of a Saudi king. The meeting follows previous encounters of the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs with the Pope and Vatican officials, most recently in September 2007. Additionally, the Saudi Government dispatched official representatives to the funeral of John Paul II in April 2005, and the Holy See reciprocated by sending officials to the funeral of King Fahd four months later. According to Ortega, the Saudis took the initiative to request King Abdallah's meeting with the Pope.

Religious Freedom in the Kingdom

¶3. (C) Ortega explained that the Holy Father treaded softly on the issue of religious freedom for the estimated 1.6 million Christians in Saudi Arabia, eighty percent of whom are believed to be Catholic. The Pope had already made a strongly-worded statement to the Saudi Foreign Minister in September 2007, and therefore chose to revisit the issue with self-imposed restraint. Ortega noted that the position of the Church on this issue is well-known to the Saudis. The King found common ground with the Pope in exalting the positive influence of religion in preserving societies' moral values. Significantly, Ortega said,

the King explicitly included Judaism in making this observation.

14. (C) Commenting on the problems faced by Christians in Saudi Arabia, Ortega lamented the ambiguity of Saudi law on religion. Private gatherings for prayer are formally allowed, while public meetings are not. However, it is not clear what distinguishes one from the other, and this sometimes leads to an arbitrary implementation of regulations. Additionally, communal places of worship are forbidden, and the absence of priests makes imparting sacraments practically impossible. The Saudi government is aware that things must change, but is also concerned with how Muslim religious leaders may react. According to Ortega, while the Saudi King knows that Christianity is not synonymous with "Western Culture", he is nevertheless afraid that greater freedoms could undermine his already fragile political-religious base.

Closer Relations

15. (C) Ortega believes conditions that would allow for the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia are not currently present, and may take some time to develop. The Saudis underlined that the King was meeting with the Pope as an Islamic leader and Custodian of Islam's Holy Places, rather than as a head of state. A reciprocal visit by the Pope to Saudi Arabia is not a possibility at this time. It would be more realistic to think about a visit by the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Dominique

SIPDIS

Mamberti, who is the equivalent to the Saudi Foreign Minister. Ortega said that neither party had suggested this visit.

Inter-Religious vs. Intra-Religious dialogue

16. (C) According to Ortega and other informed Vatican sources (protect), the Pope asked King Abdallah about "A Common Word", the letter originally signed by 138 Muslim scholars (other scholars have since added their names to the list) calling on the Pope and other Christian leaders to engage in a dialogue with Islam (reftel A). The King responded that the views

VATICAN 00000180 002.2 OF 002

expressed in the letter are not representative of those held by all Muslims. Ortega speculated that there may be some Saudi jealousy of the work of the Aal al-Bayt Institute on Islamic Thought, which provided support for the "A Common Word" drafters. (Note: the Aal al-Bayt Institute is based in Amman and is supported by the Jordanian royal family. End note.) At the same time, the signatories do not include some of the most important Islamic political-religious leaders in the world, such as the King of Morocco or the most prominent Egyptian muftis. Without first-tier signatories who command allegiance over large sectors of the Muslim faithful, Ortega added, the letter may lack the necessary weight to influence Muslim public opinion.

17. (C) Ortega nevertheless called the letter a gigantic step. Unlike other Vatican officials (reftel B), he did not underscore the letter's contribution to inter-religious relations, but rather its great potential to foster intra-religious dialogue within Islam. Christianity has long internalized that love of God and love of one's neighbor are central to the Christian faith. This theological imperative is not equally evident in Islam. The letter carefully quotes the Quran's most positive passages, ignoring those that are more belligerent. While the Christian Old Testament also has strongly-worded passages, a tradition of exegesis (critical interpretation) in Christianity allows religious leaders to explain them away as anachronistic or contextual. Ortega added that this tradition of interpreting religious texts (specifically the Quran) is absent in Islam, and scholars that delve into it have sometimes faced death threats for doing so.

¶8. (C) Ortega believes that Islam is in a deep crisis. Islamic leaders need to address the role of reason in religion, which was the point the Pope was making in his September 2006 Regensburg address, even if not in "very elegant" terms. The Regensburg address triggered an "Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI", sent in October 2006 by 38 Muslim scholars --supported by Aal al-Bayt-- calling on the Pope to engage in dialogue. The Holy See Secretary of State, Cardinal Bertone, responded with a conciliatory letter to the director of the Aal al-Bayt Institute. Although the Holy See itself has not made this response public, Ortega complained that Aal al-Bayt never corrected the media and public opinion's erroneous assumption that the Vatican did not answer this first letter. While the Holy See would appreciate better public awareness of the fact that the Vatican did respond, it believes that it is Aal al-Bayt's role, as recipient, to make reference to Bertone's reply. (Note: this is the first we have heard about any response from the Holy See to the "Open Letter". End note.)

¶9. (C) Ortega said that the King's non-endorsement of "A Common Word" need not preclude or delay a Holy See response. The Vatican's Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue will continue to work on a reply. (Note: The Holy See actually responded to "A Common Word" on November 29. See septel. End note.) Ortega welcomes the broad dissemination of "A Common Word" and its explicit recognition of religious freedom, particularly within the Muslim world. (Note: section III, paragraph 4 of the letter reads: "For God said let there be no compulsion in religion... This clearly relates to the Second Commandment and to love of the neighbor of which justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part." The complete text of the letter can be found at the website "acommonword.com". End note.)

Comment

¶10. (C) The Holy See is pleased with the King's visit, even if it remains disappointed by the lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The Vatican does not expect a sudden recognition of religious freedom in the Kingdom, but at the very least would like to see a more lenient application of current restrictions. The Pope's interest in discussing "A Common Word" with the King shows that the Holy See continues to monitor the letter's impact and to deliberate on a response. While the Holy See is skeptical about finding theological common ground with Islam, it is willing to entertain the notion if it leads to greater religious freedom in those Muslim countries where Christians can not fully practice their faith.

¶11. (C) Embassy Vatican shares the view of the Holy See that the efforts of Muslim scholars to reach out to Christians are a significant development, and one to be encouraged. Post would welcome hearing from other embassies and from the Department about reactions to these efforts.
SANDROLINI